

After the Fire, Wildlife Rescue Center Could Use One of Its Own

Jesusita Fire took a devastating toll on La Cumbre Canyon Wildlife Rescue but operator vows to rebuild for animals' sake — and her own



Nancy Callahan, founder of W.I.L.D.E.S., lets a possum out of its carrier into a pen to eat and stretch its legs. The 26 animals that Callahan has helped to rehabilitate have been displaced by the Jesusita Fire, which burned their cages and destroyed Callahan's home. (Lara Cooper / Noozhawk photo)

By Lara Cooper, Noozhawk Staff Writer | Published on 05.25.2009

It's early in the morning, and Nancy Callahan is up feeding breakfast to 10 possums housed in temporary crates. Callahan, who sports a long braid and a shirt embroidered with farm animals, runs a rehabilitation center for small mammals. But when the Jesusita Fire swept down the hillside toward them, she and her charges fled. Soon after they had evacuated, the flames overcame the facility and destroyed it.



This raccoon's paws were burned severely in the fire, but Callahan and a veterinarian are applying antibiotics and ointment to the wounds three times a day. (Lara Cooper / Noozhawk photo)

But the animals she cares for aren't the only ones who lost their home in the fire. Callahan's house, located just yards away from the animal shelter, was also ravaged by the fire, which left nothing behind but the foundation and a heap of rubble.

"It's pretty overwhelming," Callahan said. "But every day is a new day."

Callahan is the force behind La Cumbre Canyon Wildlife Rescue and Wildlife Educational Services, or W.I.L.D.E.S., which brings animals into school settings so children can learn about them.

When the Jesusita Fire broke out on the afternoon of May 5, Callahan learned about it early, and she and several helpers had enough time to get the animals out. Because Santa Barbara County regulations required that she have a fire plan in place, Callahan was able to evacuate quickly and had extra food and bedding for the animals. She was able to load up 26 animals, including her horse and one of three boars she had raised since they were piglets.

The other two refused to get into Callahan's horse trailer, so she had to set them free from their pen and trust they could fend for themselves. Wild animals have an innate ability to survive in the face of danger, she explained.

"Animals know it's something to be fearful of and take off or burrow in," she said. "Thank God there are actually some animals that made it."

Within a week, her boars were found safe, although dehydrated. Another survivor came her way when she spotted a raccoon that had been badly burned. Its feet and paws were completely charred in the blaze, and Callahan said it took her and her husband nearly three hours to catch the frightened creature. Three times a day, the raccoon's burns get treated with an antibiotic solution.

"He's improving, but it's going to be a long road," she said.

It's more than daunting to consider rebuilding her home of 20 years after losing everything, but Callahan is also thinking about the several dozen animals that depend on her. About two-thirds of the cages and pens where the animals lived have been destroyed. A medical room — complete with scales, medicines and equipment — was also incinerated.



A pair of possums that Callahan looks after get some exercise time in their temporary pens. Callahan, who operates a nonprofit rehabilitation center for small mammals, had to evacuate her home and rehab center with 26 animals as the Jesusita Fire swept toward them May 5.

(Lara Cooper / Noozhawk photo)

"It was like a little veterinary hospital," she said of the structure that is now just a charred steel frame.

“The biggest need is going to be rebuilding the cages and restocking all of the equipment and the daily needs,” she said. Random items that add up in cost, like baby formula and bottles for the baby animals, were also lost in the fire.

As she feeds the possums, that have names like Velcro, Pixie and Grandpa, her passion for animals is obvious. Five of the possums in her care had been rescued from certain death after they were taken to Montana as pets by a visitor to the South Coast and could not be released into the wild because they had been exposed to other areas. Callahan coordinated their return but learned they couldn’t be released into the wild in Santa Barbara either, so she’s adopted them so they can live out their lives.

She’s been helping animals for more than 30 years, and started as a volunteer at [Santa Barbara Wildlife Care Network](#) and then got her own educational license with the state [Department of Fish & Game](#). A registered nurse, Callahan works with a veterinarian who volunteers several times a week to care for the animals. After she was evacuated, she volunteered at the [Santa Barbara Humane Society](#) for a while “just to get away from my own stuff,” she said.



*The charred remains of animal cages at the W.I.L.D.E.S. center are about all that is left of the facility in La Cumbre Canyon.
(Lara Cooper / Noozhawk photo)*

She works in a dental office during the day, but after shifts at her day job, Callahan's work with the animals is just beginning. Organizations like area animal services, the [California Highway Patrol](#) and the Humane Society all bring her animals in need of rehabilitation, which adds up to a lot of work, and because animal rehabilitation groups get no state or federal funding, on sometimes minimal funding.

"It's a lot of work, but it's my passion," she said. "It has such big rewards."

Just as important as donations for the new cages will be people willing to pitch in and help clean the area and begin to rebuild, she said. Callahan encouraged supporters to email her at nancyc@impulse.net.

Callahan said she'll start making a plan in June, after insurance agents can inspect what's left of her home. She's also waiting to get a demolition permit.

In the meantime, she's staying at a friend's ranch with her animals, but said that rebuilding the compound for the animals is her top priority.

"I can live in a trailer for a long time, but this compound needs to be rebuilt," she said.

"That's going to be the way I recover from all this."

For more information on La Cumbre Canyon Wildlife Rescue and Wildlife Educational Services, e-mail nancyc@impulse.net.

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